

Rules of the Game

All About Initiative (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we looked at a few initiative basics and considered one method **DMs** can use to manage initiative during an encounter. As we saw last week, **characters** enter initiative order when an encounter begins and stay in initiative order until the encounter is effectively over. This week, we'll consider just when an encounter begins.

Beginning an Encounter

D&D characters often act when they're not involved in encounters. Such actions might be as simple as walking down deserted corridors or as complex as making armor or making magic items. Such activities seldom require **initiative checks**. Some actions, such as opening doors, picking locks, and searching the shadows for hidden foes tend to generate conflict. So, exactly when do you check for initiative? Does initiative begin with the act that precipitates a battle, or does it begin after that act? To answer that question, it's helpful to consider just what the initiative rules are trying to accomplish.

Some Initiative Theory

As noted in Part One, the **D&D** game's initiative system is designed to promote quick and smooth play. The system's cyclical nature allows players to consider and execute their actions without the need to declare them ahead of time and allows them to anticipate when their turns to act are coming up.

The system's design also includes other features that aren't readily apparent. For example your character may gain the upper hand in a confrontation and press an advantage by anticipating your foe's maneuvers and countering them. In the **D&D** game, you can do that through the delay or ready actions. These actions allow you to treat a high initiative result as an asset you can spend, but see the discussions of delay and ready in Part Three.

In spite of your ability to postpone your actions until a more advantageous time, you can't prepare for everything. Sometimes, you get caught with your pants down no matter how careful you are. This is why you cannot delay or ready until after you've made an initiative check.

From the page 25 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*:

As a general rule, combat actions should only be performed in combat—when you're keeping track of rounds and the players are acting in initiative order. You'll find obvious exceptions to this rule. For example, a cleric doesn't need to roll initiative to cast *cure light wounds* on a friend after the battle's over. Spellcasting and skill use are often used outside combat, and that's fine. Attacks, readied actions, charges, and other actions are meant to simulate combat, however, and are best used within the round structure.

When Does an Encounter Start?

The *Dungeon Master's Guide* says an encounter begins in one of three situations.

In each case, there is no encounter until at least one creature is aware of at least one potential foe. Without this awareness, there is no encounter and no initiative order.

It might prove helpful to examine some potential encounter openings and determine when to make initiative checks.

Two Groups Meet in a Dungeon Corridor

This is possibly the most straightforward encounter opening. The two sides check initiative when they notice each other, usually the moment when the two groups have line of sight to each other and thus can see each other.

A Party Enters an Occupied Chamber by Kicking in the Door

In many campaigns, most encounters will begin this way. There are many possible variations to this scenario, and some variations affect initiative.

Neither side notices the other before the door opens. Such a situation might occur when the room's occupants aren't keeping watch beyond the chamber's closed door (or cannot do so) and the party also fails to notice that the chamber has occupants. The party might simply fail to check the door or their attempts to do so (such as Listen checks) fail.

In this case, the encounter doesn't truly begin until someone opens the door. The action used to open the door takes place before the encounter and the character who takes the action does so before anyone makes an initiative check.

One side notices the other before the door opens. Perhaps the room's occupants have a peephole they can use to look beyond the door. Or perhaps the intruders have made a successful Listen check that reveals the room's occupants.

Things are easier to handle here if the party notes the room's occupants first. When I'm running the game, things go like this: The character who notes the room's occupants gets a free action (outside of initiative) to notify allies about the potential foes beyond the door. The newly informed characters take time preparing to enter the room, also outside initiative.

When the party is ready to hit the room, I run a **surprise round**. One or two characters open the door, and these characters act first. The **move action** the characters use to open the door counts as the single action they are allowed during the surprise round. You're actually limited to one **standard action** when you act during a surprise round, but you can always use a move action in place of a standard action (but not vice versa); see page 138 in the *Player's Handbook* and [Rules of the Game: All About Actions](#).

Once the door opens, the remainder of the party takes the single standard actions (or move actions) they're allowed during a surprise round. Since it's usually best to handle actions one character at a time, I have the characters act in the order they're standing before the door or in the order of their initiative **modifier**, whichever seems most appropriate for the situation. There still are no initiative checks because a surprise round represents

From the page 22 of the Dungeon Master's Guide:

- One side becomes aware of the other and thus can act first.
- Both sides become aware of each other at the same time.
- Some, but not all, creatures on one or both sides become aware of the other side.

a flurry of unexpected activity before a battle begins in earnest. After the party uses their surprise actions, everyone makes initiative checks. None of the PCs will be **flat-footed**, even if they don't act early in the initiative order, because they acted during the surprise round.

That's it. Once everyone checks initiative and I've recorded the initiative order, the encounter proceeds from there. Here are a few more things to consider:

Overall, the approach described here favors the group assaulting the room. It might seem a little harsh to make characters use their surprise actions to open the door, but the act takes some time and the defenders inside the room deserve a little break for being behind a closed door. Allowing the party to open the door before the surprise (so that the characters opening the door get to act against the foe along with their allies), would tilt the situation even further toward the attackers.

You could make things tougher on the attackers by skipping the surprise round. The attackers could prepare themselves as noted earlier, but the encounter would not truly begin until the door opens. At that point, both parties would be aware of each other and initiative checks would be in order. If you choose this approach, it's reasonable to assume that the attackers might be flat-footed until their first actions. The party might know a battle is coming, but they're still subject to a moment of uncertainty when the actual event begins.

It's worth noting here that peace officers and members of the military I've spoken with tell me that assaulting a closed, defended room can prove quite dangerous, especially if the defenders keep their heads. I tend to prefer an approach that favors the PCs because they're supposed to be the heroes and the stars of the campaign. You might choose differently, and so might I if the PCs face a particularly canny or well-prepared foe.

All the foregoing assumes that the characters entering the room notice the opposition first. What happens if the room's defenders are forewarned and the group entering the room remains unaware of what awaits them beyond the door? If the defenders decide to preempt their foes and attack, you can run the encounter exactly as described above, except that the group attacking from inside the room surprises the party outside.

If the defenders decide to wait for the enemy to enter their chamber, they can use the time before the attack comes as they see fit. There's no need for initiative checks while the defenders prepare.

When the party outside finally opens the door, everyone checks for initiative when the door opens. You can allow the group inside the room a surprise round first, but I don't recommend doing so. It usually doesn't pay to await a foe's action. Characters who know a confrontation is about to commence might want to ready actions. Doing so would bend the rules because you're not supposed to use the ready action until after an encounter starts. The DM, however, might want to allow readying in this special situation. In any case, ready is an action itself, and the character with the readied action must give up other preparations.

A Party Opens a Chest and Releases an Imprisoned Fiend

This situation really isn't much different from breaking into a closed room. The party opens the chest before the encounter really begins and nobody checks for initiative until the fiend emerges from its imprisonment. One side might surprise the other if they spot the opposition before being noticed themselves, just as noted previously. The DM also can adjust things to favor one side or the other, also as noted previously.

What's Next?

That's all the time we have this week. Next week, we'll consider the fine art of deciding just when an encounter ends. We'll also examine a few odds and ends related to initiative.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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